



JOHN MILLER TURPIN FINNEY

1863 - 1942

## IN MEMORIAM

## JOHN MILLER TURPIN FINNEY

**D**R. FINNEY, John Miller Turpin Finney, professor emeritus of surgery in the Johns Hopkins University, died on May 30, 1942, at his home in Baltimore. The details of his long and distinguished career, from infancy until his retirement from active service as a surgeon, are set down in his autobiography, published in 1940. His father and, on the paternal side, his grandfather, were Presbyterian ministers, natives of Maryland, but Finney himself was born in Mississippi where his father was pastor of a church in the neighborhood of Natchez during the period of the Civil War. He had what he called a peripatetic childhood, due partly to the nature of his father's profession and partly to the fact that his mother died shortly after his birth. His school days were spent chiefly at Bel Air, Maryland, where his father had charge of the local Presbyterian church. In due course he entered Princeton University, in the sophomore class, graduating in 1884. For his medical training he went to Harvard and on completion of the course began his professional career as an intern on the resident surgical staff of the Massachusetts General Hospital. Before finishing this service he received an appointment to Dr. Halsted's staff at the newly opened Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore. There he went in 1889 and there he remained for the rest of his life, in spite of flattering calls to important positions elsewhere, such as the chair of surgery at Harvard and the presidency of Princeton University. This latter call made an especially strong appeal to him for he had a deep affection for his college, and as a "Life Trustee" was directly concerned in its future development.

Some of his friends whose advice he had asked, including the present writer, felt that he ought to accept the offer with its potential possibilities of distinction and service, but after mature consideration he declined the call. He could not see himself as fitted for such a position, and, perhaps, he could not bring himself to the point of severing his ties

with surgery, the profession that he loved and in which he had been so eminently successful. Whether or not, if he had accepted the call, his own life would have been any richer or more distinguished than it actually was, no one, of course, can say. But one may feel confident that Princeton University would have profited by his acceptance. His unusually sound judgment, his tolerance and his intellectual integrity would have made him, in all probability, a safe and effective leader. Above all, it would have been of inestimable benefit to a full generation of students to have been brought into contact with his wholesome personality. One can imagine that it would have permeated and inspired the lives of many men who have since risen to positions of influence and leadership.

At this period in his life he was not only the leading practitioner of surgery in Baltimore, and distinguished in his profession, both nationally and internationally, but he had also become one of Baltimore's chief citizens, respected and loved both for his medical skill and for his services to the city and the state in connection with various educational and social institutions. When he declined the call to Princeton and decided to stay with his profession his fellow citizens and medical associates combined to give him a testimonial dinner to signify "the sense of gratitude felt by his friends at his decision to remain in Baltimore."

A similar expression of the general esteem in which he was held was a large banquet in his honor, on the occasion of his seventy-fifth birthday, at which his contributions to medicine and to the communal life were emphasized, and a personal letter from the President of the United States was read, in appreciation of his activities in the American Red Cross and of his distinguished services as Chief Consultant in Surgery to the American Army during the first World War.

Among such expressions of affection the one that probably gave him the most pleasure was a unique tribute arranged by his associate and long-time companion, Dr. George Walker. Walker came to the Hopkins from South Carolina, shortly after the opening of the Hospital, to serve on the surgical staff under Finney. He was a lovable and somewhat eccentric personality with some of the characteristics of the traditional Southern gentleman, generous, chivalrous and quick-tempered. Finney always spoke of him as Marse George. His admiration for Finney was unbounded. In Kipling's poem "If" the virtues of the ideal man are pictured in strong beautiful words:

"If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,  
Or walk with kings, nor lose the common touch."

In Walker's opinion no one fitted this picture so well as his friend. He conceived, therefore, a plan to have Kipling sign a copy of the poem and then present it to Dr. Finney at a gathering of selected guests. Through Lord Moynihan, the English surgeon, whom he had known in France during the war, he obtained Kipling's consent to give his autograph. As promptly as possible he departed for London with a beautifully engraved copy of the poem and a special gold pen and bottle of indelible ink. His difficulties in obtaining the signature made an entertaining story which Walker's friends delighted to have him relate. Moynihan was out of the country, Kipling could not be located, their respective secretaries knew nothing of the promise and had no record of any correspondence bearing upon it. Eventually, however, he was successful, although he did not see Kipling personally. On his return to Baltimore a dinner was arranged and the presentation was made. Unfortunately Dr. Walker was not able to make the presentation himself, as was intended, since he was confined to the hospital with an illness, which subsequently caused his death, but it was an unusually pleasant and intimate occasion, for the poem did serve to express something of the high estimate that his friends placed upon the fine personal qualities of Dr. Finney, and in Walker's absence Dr. Finney seized the opportunity to pay a warm tribute to Marse George.

After the death of Dr. Halsted in 1922 Finney was asked to take the full-time chair in surgery, but declined the offer, partly because he felt that a younger man should be selected, and partly because he had some mental reservations in regard to the wisdom of a full-time professorship in surgery. He continued, therefore, as professor of clinical surgery, later professor of surgery, in the University, and visiting surgeon in the Hospital, until his retirement for age in 1933.

Until a few weeks before his death he had excellent health and was extremely active with consultations and with attendance upon the meetings of various boards of which he was a member. His major interest, perhaps, during these last years was in connection with his duties as Chairman of the Baltimore Chapter of the American Red Cross.

Dr. Finney's eminence as a surgeon is known to all members of the medical profession. One need only recall that he was offered the chair of surgery at Harvard and at the Johns Hopkins, that he received the

Bigelow Medal for Achievement in Surgery, that he was the first president of the American College of Surgeons, and that during the first World War he was appointed Chief Consultant in Surgery to the American Expeditionary Forces.

His associates and friends loved him for his own good self. He had a great heart and a remarkable gift for making and keeping friends. His professional work and his extraprofessional activities brought him into contact with all sorts and conditions of men, so that he got a close view of both the noble and the ignoble motives that control human conduct. It is to his great credit that always he emphasized the excellencies rather than the follies of his fellow-man, and his fellow-man responded by according to him a measure of confidence and affection such as few persons are privileged to enjoy.

WILLIAM H. HOWELL.

#### DEATH OF FELLOW

FINNEY, JOHN MILLER TURPIN: 2947 St. Paul Street, Baltimore, Maryland; born in Mississippi, June 20, 1863; died in Baltimore, Maryland, May 30, 1942; received the degree of B.A. from Princeton University in 1884; graduated in medicine from Harvard Medical School in 1889; elected an Honorary Fellow of the Academy November 18, 1926.

Dr. Finney was emeritus professor of surgery at the Johns Hopkins University

and surgeon to the Johns Hopkins and Union Memorial Hospitals, Hospital for Women of Maryland, and the Church Home and Infirmary. He was one of the founders of the American College of Surgeons and its first president (1913-1916); a Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons of Ireland, a member and former president of the American Surgical Association, and a member of the Society of Clinical Surgery.

During the World War, Dr. Finney was Chief Consultant in Surgery in the American Expeditionary Forces in France with the rank of Colonel, later receiving the rank of Brigadier General. For his war services he received the American Distinguished Service Medal; and was made Comdr. de l'Ordre de la Couronne (Belgium); Officier de la Légion d'Honneur (France).